Sunday 29 November – First Sunday of Advent

Sermon by The Rt Rev'd Lynne Cullens The Bishop of Barking

As it is a special Advent service from St. Luke's, the sermon from the Diocese is shown below and can be watched at Weekly Sermons from the Diocese of Chelmsford. An audio recording of the reflection from St Luke's will be available after the service at Sermons (tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Today we enter the season of Advent. Advent is almost unique in the Christian calendar, in that these weeks building up to Christmas offer an invitation, an encouragement, to hold before us the past, the present and the future.

We look back to the words of the prophets, such as we have in our reading from Isaiah this morning…yearning for the coming of the Messiah.

And we look forward in anticipation to Christ's coming again, as heralded in our reading from the Gospel of Mark.

And in the space between looking back and looking forward, Advent calls us to consider the present, and in particular to look at ourselves and our lives.

I wonder how you are arriving in Advent this year? Are you content and hopeful? With a year of good things behind you perhaps? Or have you arrived anxious, tired, fearful, sad even – so many of us are feeling deeply unsettled by events and developments, nationally and globally, at this time.

Well however you've arrived, I have hope that the season of Advent holds good news for you.

To the hopeful and expectant, Advent brings the affirmation of prophecy fulfilled. God was not deaf to the cries of his people – and he is not deaf to our prayers and petitions today. To those of us praying, to those waiting, to those hoping for good outcomes that may have been a long time coming, the promise of Advent - written right across the sky before the shepherd's blinded gaze that first Christmas - is that we have a God who hears and who acts. Our hope is not in vain.

And to the anxious, the sorrowful, the stressed, and the overlooked…those seemingly always at the back of the line; the comfort of Advent is that the greatest message ever delivered in the history of humankind – the message from God to reveal his son's birth to the world – wasn't given to Kings or Princes, nor was it given to scholars or academics, nor to the wealthy and

those of status – God sent the angel hosts of Heaven to a group of poor, dirty, shepherds. Because this is who the Good News was for – for those with little earthly consolation, God sent his own son.

And this Messiah didn't arrive in the way that was expected…God rarely acts in the way we expect. God surprised the world that first Christmas…here was a king without a palace, here was God in a feeding trough.

And God followed through in the surprise of the nature of Jesus' messianic identity, come to save us not through displays of strength, or violence or force but through self-sacrifice, through the radical love of others, through the preaching of an abiding message of hope, peace and compassion… author Gerard Hughes in his work "The God of Surprises," suggests that God often acts in unexpected and often unseen ways and places… within the ordinary circumstances of our lives and within ourselves. God delights in surprising us, in fact; he delights in subverting our human ideas and expectations and in doing so he reveals more of his divine nature and purpose….

How many answers to prayer has our God of surprises set among us that we are failing to see, that we are failing to notice because the answer looks like God's answer and not our own, not the answer we expected God to send.

As this season of waiting, of expectation and of our being reminded again of God's surprise to the world in the person of Jesus Christ begins, may we remain true and hopeful Advent people, may we look with fresh eyes at ourselves, at our neighbours and at our communities, and may we be open to God's surprises in answering prayer for us and through us….

This Advent, and I'm using words written by Elizabeth Eiland Figueroa here, may the God of Surprises delight you, inviting you to accept gifts not yet imagined.

May the God of Abundance affirm you, nudging you towards ever deeper trust. May the God of Justice confront you, daring you to see the world through His eyes. May the God of Hopefulness bless you, encouraging you with the fruits of faith. And may God Who is Present be with you, awakening you to God in all things, all people, and all moments.

This Advent, this Christmas, and always…may God be with you.

Amen.